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## No Teacher Left Behind

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The teachers unions have more influence over the public schools than any other group in American society. They influence schools from the bottom up, through collective bargaining activities that shape virtually every aspect of school organization. And they influence schools from the top down, through political activities that shape government policy. They are the 800-pound gorillas of public education. Yet the American public is largely unaware of how influential they are -- and how much they impede efforts to improve public schools.

The problem is not that the unions are somehow bad or ill-intentioned. They aren't. The problem is that when they simply do what all organizations do -- pursue their own interests -- they are inevitably led to do things that are not in the best interests of children.

To appreciate why this is so, consider the parallel to business firms. No one claims that these organizations are in business to promote the public interest. They are in business to make money, and this is the fundamental interest that drives their behavior. Thus, economists and policy makers fully expect firms to pollute the water and air when polluting is less costly (and more profitable) than not polluting -- and that is why we have laws against pollution. The problem is not that firms are out to destroy the environment. The problem is simply that their interests are not identical to the public interest, and the two inevitably come into conflict.

Teachers unions have to be understood in much the same way. Their behavior is driven by fundamental interests too, except that their interests have to do with the jobs, working conditions, and material well-being of teachers. When unions negotiate with school boards, these are the interests they pursue, not those of the children who are supposed to be getting educated.

The resulting contracts often run to more than 100 pages, and are filled with provisions for higher wages, fantastic health benefits and retirement packages, generous time off, total job security, teacher transfer and assignment rights, restrictions on how teachers can be evaluated, restrictions on non-classroom duties, and countless other rules that shackle the discretion of administrators. These contracts make the schools costly to run, heavily bureaucratic, and extremely difficult for administrators to manage. They also ensure that even the most incompetent teachers are virtually impossible to remove from the classroom. The organization of schools, as a result, is not even remotely the kind of organization one would design if the best interests of children were the guiding criterion.

Exactly the same can be said about the design of government education policy, which is tilted toward teacher interests through the unions' exercise of political power. The sources of their power are not difficult to discern. With three million members, they control huge amounts of money that can be handed out in campaign contributions. More important, they have members in every political district in

the country, and can field armies of activists who make phone calls, ring doorbells, and do whatever else is necessary to elect friends and defeat enemies. No other interest group in the country can match their political arsenal. It is not surprising, then, that politicians at all levels of government are acutely sensitive to what the teachers unions want. This is especially true of Democrats, most of whom are their reliable allies.

When the teachers unions want government to act, the reforms they demand are invariably in their own interests: more spending, higher salaries, smaller classes, more professional development, and so on. There is no evidence that any of these is an important determinant of student learning. What the unions want above all else, however, is to block reforms that seriously threaten their interests -- and these reforms, not coincidentally, are attempts to bring about fundamental changes in the system that would significantly improve student learning.

The unions are opposed to No Child Left Behind, for example, and indeed to all serious forms of school accountability, because they do not want teachers' jobs or pay to depend on their performance. They are opposed to school choice -- charter schools and vouchers -- because they don't want students or money to leave any of the schools where their members work. They are opposed to the systematic testing of veteran teachers for competence in their subjects, because they know that some portion would fail and lose their jobs. And so it goes. If the unions can't kill these threatening reforms outright, they work behind the scenes to make them as ineffective as possible -- resulting in accountability systems with no teeth, choice systems with little choice, and tests that anyone can pass.

If we really want to improve schools, something has to be done about the teachers unions. The idea that an enlightened "reform unionism" will somehow emerge that voluntarily puts the interests of children first -- an idea in vogue among union apologists -- is nothing more than a pipe dream. The unions are what they are. They have fundamental, job-related interests that are very real, and are the *raison d'être* of their organizations. These interests drive their behavior, and this is not going to change. Ever.

If the teachers unions won't voluntarily give up their power, then it has to be taken away from them -- through new laws that, among other things, drastically limit (or prohibit) collective bargaining in public education, link teachers' pay to their performance, make it easy to get rid of mediocre teachers, give administrators control over the assignment of teachers to schools and classrooms, and prohibit unions from spending a member's dues on political activities unless that member gives explicit prior consent.

These reforms won't come easily because the unions will use their existing power, which is tremendous, to defeat most attempts to take it away. There is, however, one ray of hope: that the American public will become informed about the unions' iron grip on the public schools and demand that something be done. Only when the public speaks out will politicians have the courage -- and the electoral incentive -- to do the right thing. And only then will the interests of children be given true priority.

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